



Mountaineer Silvia Vasquez-Lavado Knows the Highest Mountain is the One Within

The adventurer, activist, and first openly gay woman to complete the Seven Summits shares the childhood trauma and self-destructive behavior that brought her to the world's highest mountain.

Alicia Menendez:

Silvia Vasquez-Lavado is the first Peruvian woman to summit Everest, the world's highest mountain, and the first openly gay woman to complete the seven summits, the seven highest mountains on each of the seven continents. Her new book, *In The Shadow of the Mountain: A Memoir of Courage* explores the sexual abuse she endured as a child, the time she spent trying to outrun her pain, manifest addictions to alcohol, to work and sex and the vision that led to the mountain and to healing itself. Silvia, thank you so much for doing this.

Silvia Vasquez-...:

Alicia, thank you so much with this invitation. I am just thrilled, what an opportunity, thank you.

Menendez:

Silvia, you write: Some people are drawn up the mountain for glory, others are pushed up by pain. Silvia, what was the pain that drew you to the mountain?

Vasquez-Lavado:

By the time I was climbing Everest, I had an accumulation of pain yet the main pain that led me to this journey was the unfortunate experience that I had to go through which unfortunately, one in three women around the world have to experience it which is the trauma of I mean, surviving sexual assault as a little girl. And unfortunately, this happened for many years. That shame had caused so much chaos in my life, had developed into an addiction that had marked my life quite a bit yet also at the time, I was bringing a lot of my grief having lost my mother, having lost very dear person in my life. There was an accumulation yet all started by the journey of trying to heal the experience that I went as a little girl.

Menendez:

I want to unpack that and I want to take us back to a moment where you've not even begun that process and that is, you arriving from Peru, to the United States, to Pennsylvania to go to college and your rendering of yourself is so sweet, right? That you're on the train track just trying to get to campus and you keep introducing yourself to strangers as Silvia from Peru as though the entire State of Pennsylvania was waiting for your arrival and I was struck by the fact that college it's four years, it is a lot of time but you go from being that girl to your first job after college, you work at Skyy Vodka whereas you

write, you become a workaholic, alcoholic, sexaholic, that is a lot of change in a very short period of time.

Vasquez-Lavado:

That was one of the funnest chapters for me to work on and I have just recently being asked to be the commencement speaker at my university and I can't wait to deliver that line. Hello everybody, I am Silvia from Peru. In many ways, I had a little bit of a childhood interrupted and my innocence was interrupted. And because I was constantly running away from just the shame and the fact that the circumstances that I grew up with also were not very supportive in terms of erasing what had happened to me. If anything, there was a lot of secrecy and there was a lot of keeping face and so coming to the US for me was a way of escaping and I find myself that I was quite ill-equipped to face being on my own. I felt like I was a little bird caged all of a sudden they open up the cage and I'm desperate but I don't know how to fly. And so I felt for me being in the US was a way of rewriting my life and not having to look at my past.

Vasquez-Lavado:

And that led it to feeling that if I could develop 'a normal life', if I could have a successful career in doing anything that my father would've deemed of acceptable, that I would have outsmart my pain, that I would have outsmart life and that was a challenge because I think what I had learned is that you can't unfortunately trying to cut any part of yourself. Eventually, is going to have an impact in the long-term and not a positive one.

Menendez: You introduce this idea of false bottoms, of things that we think are absolute worst and you take us through a series of them including a DUI with a parked bus where you blow a 0.28 or, that's your blood alcohol level is 0.28 which is four times the legal limit. That's not your rock bottom.

Vasquez-Lavado:

No.

Menendez: Your rock bottom actually ends up being a very surprising, but telling rock bottom. What was it that you needed?

Vasquez-Lavado:

I think it was to be witnessed by my family. It was, I mean, especially my youngest brother who because of my migrating to the US to study, I had to leave and leaving him when he was just seven, eight years old was so painful especially because when he was born, I remember making a commitment that I would be there to protect him from a lot of the pain that we have grown up with. Not so much the abuse, but at least the way that my father was. And so having to leave my youngest brother was always really hard and so then, the opportunity came for him to eventually move to the US and we were living together and he found me passed out at the entrance of the apartment that we were sharing and that was enough for me to actually having been witnessed by him that I could not longer run. I mean, to finally almost seeing my secret discovered was, I felt that I couldn't hide. I knew my brother would tell my mum and that was pretty powerful.

Menendez: Is that the point at which mom brings you home to Peru for the Ayahuasca Ceremony?

Vasquez-Lavado:

That is the point.

Menendez: Because that is a real turn that I did not see coming. Mom recruiting dad and saying, "This is the path forward."

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Vasquez-Lavado:

My mother was such a conservative person.

Menendez: So conservative.

Vasquez-Lavado:

So conservative, in her own upbringing. But when she suggested, I just felt, I mean, I already had self shame. Now I had the shame of my family having witnessed what this disease was doing and so I had nowhere to hide and I felt well, mom's know best. I mean, I remember flying to Lima and almost going there with the expectation that I was going to encounter the negative forces that were causing this pain. I felt I was going to encounter maybe people that were wanting my demise. I was literally going into this ceremony feeling like, all right, bring it on. Who are those evils around it? And who do I encounter?

Was-

Menendez: Yourself.

Vasquez-Lavado:

I see that little girl that I have been trying to destroy, ignore, ashamed of. I see her and all she wanted was to be embraced and acknowledged and I will never forget that emotion, that feeling of just hugging her and just even in Ayahuasca feeling in my heart, whoa, there's something that weird. There's a missing piece. It almost felt like this little lego coming together and that is what makes it so magical that just as we are having this special moment then we hear these rumblings and mountains formed around us, which was so strange.

Menendez: Draw a line for me from having that vision of yourself, hugging little girl version of yourself, the mountains appearing around you and then your first climb. What did it require of you to prepare to get ready for that first climb?

Vasquez-Lavado:

I had never in my life gone on a hike. I have never gone. I mean, I had gone camping to the point of, I would drive to the campsite, set up the tent, hang out with friends, drink and then drive out of the campsite and then drive away. That was my couple of exposures so really hiking wasn't like, oh really? I mean, as I started reflecting, I'm like, "Well, it's this biggest pain that had paralyzed and had caused so much self retraction in my life. It's only appropriate to bring it to the tallest place in the world." Biggest pain, biggest mountain, biggest mountain Nepal. Okay, base of Everest. I can walk that. And so when I was trying to organize a trip, a couple of the hiccups that I realized first, you need two weeks to do the trip to the base of Everest. I only had one week available to do it. And so even from the get-go, I'm like, "Okay, well, let me just do this so that if I ever have to figure out what would've happened."

Vasquez-Lavado:

And so here again, I went in without no expectation. I've been to the point that I didn't own anything when I went to the truck except for the shoes, everything had been loaned to me, this wasn't on my DNA. I landed in Kathmandu and even when I landed, agency owner told me, "You know what? You're not going to make it in a week. You're not going to have enough time to be to the base of Everest." And I was like, "All right, I'm already here. I'm just going on a walk. The little girl inside of me, who is still inside of me wanted me, what am I going to see?" Okay, I will never forget that just heading into the mountain with a local guy and a porter and when I came across the Himalayas on the second day, that's when

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my life really got turned upside down because the site... I will never forget that moment, just we were climbing out of Namcha Barwa, making a right turn going around a big curve and all of a sudden, the curtains open up and these enormous peaks are over towering everything.

Vasquez-Lavado:

My profile, I'm a tiny little ant and I think, what really was so meaningful is that reflection of like, oh my God, I had never seen anything that spectacular. And instead of feeling scared, I felt a sense of welcoming. I felt a sense of safety, of a visibility that I had never felt in my life. And somehow my courage started growing in and I wanted to go further. It just felt like, oh my God, I belong here. I just want to keep seeing more and more. That put a fire in me that I made it to the base of Everest in four days. From somebody who had never climbed before, I went from zero to, okay, well, I guess I have to become a mountaineer.

Menendez:

There's the part, and in the shadow of the mountain that jumped out at me, I think it's going to jump out to our listeners and that is you're right. To say that I was unfaithful because my father had been so is too easy. Nothing true is that simple, but also be untrue to completely deny that it was in the blood, in the name that I come from a long line of men with second families and secret children, of women who turned other cheek and then the other often because they had no choice. While I rejected the options Peruvian culture gave me for womanhood, in the process, I slipped into another stereotype, the unfaithful man in the house, the dog with a bone. And I wonder Silvia if you have found a third way.

Vasquez-Lavado:

Absolutely. I think now, I have now four years sober. Writing this book has been the biggest gift to me, has allowed me to really embrace my own healing and also has allowed me to expand my understanding of life. I think when we neglect ourselves, we have a very limited view of who we can be. What I truly have learned now through a lot of the healing practices that I'm doing is this beautiful term called common humanity. When we're feeling that we're going through a certain pain, that we're feeling that we are experiencing something that no one else can identify in our close surroundings, the idea of common humanity is to know that someone somewhere around the world is going through that as well and allowing our mind to expand to that point. To what you were mentioning right now, I think that is the third alternative. I had lived my life with this defense of, who is there to get me? And let me outrun and let me be prepared and it's almost like you either have to be the stronger or the weak role.

Vasquez-Lavado:

But what common humanity has allowed me to realize is that, wait, why do you need to fit under one of two categories? What if we can just be both? Be with the pain, be with emotion of strength. I mean, and combine it and in many ways, this is one of the reasons that I say, my vulnerability has been my strength.

Menendez: At any point, do you train to go up the mountain?

Vasquez-Lavado:

I started training [laughing]... I like how that comes out! Yes, the whole being in the base of Everest was the beginning of it and then I decided like, okay, well, how am I going to climb a mountain and how am I going to do this? And then I broke it down, let me do the seven summits. Let me actually start from the easiest to the hardest. It just felt like this logical step. And so the training for the mountains, it was pretty much like an urban jungle

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training. Whatever was around me, I will carry a lot of weight on my backpack in San Francisco. Outside when you cross the Golden Gate, there is this area called Marin, Mill Valley and it's beautiful. Mill Valley, there's amazing trails so I will be pulling tires, I will be-

Menendez: Oh my God.

Vasquez-Lavado:

Carrying...

Menendez: Imagining you in Marin with the tires on your back.

Vasquez-Lavado:

Yes. And creating the noise, I had no shame. I mean, it was almost a matter of survival. I couldn't go to a mountain. I love whenever I would be on business trips and I was a couple of weeks shy of an expedition because I will always do my expeditions on holiday breaks or I mean, I think my last three years before Everest, I was all my Christmases were on a mountain. I would take any opportunity even if I would be on a business trip. If I would be in New York City or somewhere else or overseas, if there was not a mountain, there was a big building so I would go up the stairs and I would climb up to the 45th floor of a hotel just thinking, it would be embarrassing here.

Vasquez-Lavado:

You have these women with a little backpack going up the stairs. I mean, I just became creative. There was that part about, you do with what you have. And I mean, I was just committed because I knew I needed at least to have the cardio. I mean, the technical aspect I learned in different climbs. I did Mont Blanc, I did Rainier, I started getting a little bit more skill sets to get prepared, crossing ladders. I mean, there, there was something that I started building up.

Menendez: The scene where you have your neighbor build a rickety ladder so that again, you can just be, in your backyard.

Vasquez-Lavado:

In my backyard.

Menendez: ...crossing across neighbor's houses.

Vasquez-Lavado:

And it is so hilarious that when I get to do the training of ladders, it's almost like, you shouldn't have even bothered. It's just not, doesn't really compare so yeah, it's a combination. That's what I love. It's just being me, being just the regular flawed human being that I am and just try my best. I get points for creativity I think

Menendez: You do, 100%. There is the bravery of your adventures. There is the bravery of your life Silvia. I would argue that in the shadow of the mountain, just writing a book that is this raw and this honest is itself an extreme act of courage. I wonder if there was any point where you were halfway up this proverbial mountain where you were like, "You know what, I want to take some of it back."

Vasquez-Lavado:

The reason what led me to write the book was very unique. On my anniversary of Everest, I was on my way to work. I was cycling. It was a beautiful day. I was 10-day shy of going to Denali to try to complete my last mountain. It was this gorgeous day in San Francisco and I decided to bike. I would bike half the time, drive half the time and I went out without a helmet. And as I was coming down into market in Castro, a truck almost cut me and I ended up falling on a ditch. And I hit my head and I passed out in the middle of the road. I

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woke up when I was in an ambulance and they were taking me to trauma. The collision, the pain, and the speed that I had come through had just been so hard that my brain shook.

Vasquez-Lavado:

I ended up on the ER and as I was there, the doctors found a small brain tumor at the base of my brain stem. And the very first night on intensive care, they couldn't tell if my tumor was benign or cancerous. And I remember I had my friends that had come in, they were keeping me company. I kicked everybody out. I had a time to myself and the very first thing I said, "Wow okay, well, cancer has been in my family. This could be cancerous." And very first thing that came to me was gratitude. I felt gratitude for the most beautiful sites that I had seen in my life. The most gorgeous sunsets, the most gorgeous sunrises, when you're in such high altitude.

Vasquez-Lavado:

I had walked higher than a storm. Who could experience some of these beautiful views and so I told myself, "Well, gratitude. And if I have about a year to live, I will quit my job tomorrow and I'll spend the rest of my life trying to connect with as many young girls as I can. Inspire them to be out in nature, trying to climb as much as I can and find a way to share this story." Because hopefully, this could inspire someone. And luckily, my tumor has been benign yet that was the seed when I started to share the story. And so when I completed Denali and when the opportunity came for me to really to share the story, I committed myself to do it not from a place of ego, but to do it from a very wholesome place and I was very purposeful about it.

Menendez: Silvia, what did I miss?

Vasquez-Lavado:

One of the pieces that we can talk is the power of awe. Awe was one of the biggest emotions that with the trauma you can easily put on the side. Life gets on the way and we just like... We just become jaded. And that is the beauty when you see little kids. It's just everything. Every single day for them is awe, is something new, they get excited. It is that discovery. And that is something really powerful that I was hoping to make a point within the book is that, it is still in us. It's never going to go away. If we just allow just a little walk in nature and it doesn't have to be the most extreme mountain, you would be surprised giving yourself that space. If we can find a little time, maybe early in the morning, just as the sun is coming out. I think a little quiet can give us that opportunity and that is a part of what I have loved about the metaphor of the book is that one single step that we created change.

Menendez: Silvia, thank you so much for doing this.

Vasquez-Lavado:

Thank you Alicia.

Menendez: Thank you as always, for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead, Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and makes this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at ola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram, tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, Latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you are

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